International Journal of Lifelong Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tled20

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Published online: 23 Jun 2008.

To cite this article: Judith Walker (2008) Going for gold in 2010: an analysis of British Columbia’s literacy goal, International Journal of Lifelong Education, 27:4, 463-482, DOI: 10.1080/02601370802051462

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02601370802051462

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Going for gold in 2010: an analysis of British Columbia’s literacy goal

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This paper examines a recent government initiative aimed at raising adult literacy levels across the Canadian province of British Columbia by 2010. Through analysis of policy documents and interviews conducted with policymakers, analysts, researchers and practitioners, the author argues that the current focus on adult literacy in British Columbia can best be understood as part of a broader agenda of promoting lifelong learning for the knowledge economy and global competition. The findings show that like the Olympic Games themselves set to occur in the province in 2010, literacy has come to be seen as a contest, where there are winners and losers, participants and non-participants. Nonetheless, the findings also suggest that there exist unique possibilities and opportunities for community development and civic engagement through a campaign that has increasing literacy rates as its main objective.

Introduction and context

In 2010, the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) is set to host the Winter Olympics. Although few British Columbians will be competing in the actual games, they have already become implicated in a global competition of sorts: to help make their province into the most literate and best educated jurisdiction on the continent by the year 2010 (BC Liberals 2006, Province of British Columbia 2007). The provincial Premier, Gordon Campbell, has declared literacy his ‘number one goal’ (Premier’s Advisory Panel 2005: 1) and wishes to leave a highly skilled and educated populace as part of his legacy. For his ‘Legacies Now 2010’ vision, Campbell established five main pillars, mirroring the five Olympic rings: literacy, sports, arts, volunteers and community, which were recently translated into: ‘embrace learning’, ‘be active’, ‘explore arts’, ‘get involved’, and ‘include everyone’ (2010 Legacies Now).

As a vital component of the ‘embrace learning’ initiative, ‘Literacy Now’ was established to identify local literacy needs and increase participation, sustainability and performance through partnerships, mentoring and communities (Literacy Now 2005). Provided with an initial fund of CD$5 million from the provincial government in 2004, the organisation offers grants of up to CD$10,000 for community groups to initiate literacy plans (Literacy Now 2005). Other adult literacy initiatives

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have received attention; in 2005 the Ministry of Education announced that CD$1.34 million would be allotted to fund 50 adult literacy programmes across the province (Ministry of Education 2005), and, not a year before, the government pledged almost CD$1.5 million solely for adult literacy (Ministry of Education 2005). Across British Columbia, citizens and residents are being informed of the importance of engaging in their own learning. The province’s capital city, Victoria, was unveiled as a ‘Global Learning City’ in 2006 (Select Standing Committee on Education 2006), and communities are actively working towards raising the literacy levels of their residents, from Vancouver’s hockey team’s support of family literacy (Canuck’s Family Education Centre 2006), to the recent establishment of a learning centre and literacy council in rural BC’s aptly named ‘Learning Canyon’ (Faris 2006).

It may be tempting to view such efforts as a result of Premier Campbell’s ‘I have a dream’ Martin Luther King moment, and specific and perhaps unique to the case of British Columbia. However, this British Columbian call to upgrade one’s literacy skills can be viewed as part and parcel of a broader trend of promoting lifelong learning in developed nations as a response to increasing global competition in the knowledge economy. What makes the case of British Columbia interesting is that calls for increasing one’s literacy skills are tied to a new-found nationalism at a provincial level (or provincialism in a very literal sense), and a promotion of community education under the guise of competition.

The purpose of this research was to examine British Columbia’s current literacy strategy to shed light on what it might mean and has meant for the provision and role of adult literacy in the province. The article brings together policy analysis and findings yielded from interviews conducted with experts in policy and practice of adult literacy in the province of BC. Drawing from the case of British Columbia, an analysis is developed of the role of literacy in the knowledge economy/society, and the relationship between literacy and competition on a more global scale. After examining the literature on the connections between literacy, competition and the knowledge economy, the findings from this particular study are presented. The paper concludes by exploring the contradictions inherent in the link between literacy and competitiveness.

**Examining the role of learning and literacy in the knowledge economy**

Although literacy rates are considered to be over 99 per cent in most Western democracies (Central Intelligence Agency 2007), literacy has become a pet cause for many governments of developed nations. Ever since the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), conducted between 1994 and 1998, and the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS), carried out in the first part of the twenty-first century, governments in OECD countries have been alerted to the purportedly inadequate literacy skills possessed by those within their national borders (OECD and Statistics Canada 1995, 2005). According to these two assessment tools, as well as institutions, governments, and academics, literacy is no longer merely conceived as the ability to read and write, but rather is acknowledged as comprising a wide variety of competencies that lie on a continuum. Added to basic reading and writing are numeracy, analytical literacy, computer literacy, and even social skills or life skills literacy—not to mention emotional literacy; the original idea of ‘literacy’ as being able to read or write has changed drastically.
This more encompassing definition of literacy and the increasing focus placed on it can be seen as part of a rapidly growing global concern with lifelong learning. It is claimed that literacy skills need to be improved since what are considered 'minimal' skills for survival have increased due to mounting global competition for jobs, the growth of contract work and, more specifically, the need for certain computer skills. Indeed, advances in technology which have occurred over the past decades have both expanded the ways in which individuals interact textually and intensified the frequency with which they need to do so. It is undisputed that computer literacy has become more essential as certain transactions, which were previously either conducted in person or perhaps over the phone, are now needing to be completed online. In addition, there has been a substantial increase in the amounts of textual correspondence due to the introduction of email, text messaging and technologies such as MSN messenger. Being able to engage creatively and adeptly with new technologies is increasingly becoming crucial, with a non-trivial number of jobs requiring certain skill sets and mastery of and/or familiarity with certain technologies. As a response to a perceived gap between people's skill sets and those necessary for survival in the job place or to function in society, an atmosphere of crisis has emerged pervading public discourse with the call for citizens to engage in lifelong learning (see Field 2001, Martin 2003) and to shape-up their 'inadequate literacy skills', especially for those at the bottom of the pack (Veeman et al. 2006).

**A competitive advantage for the nation-state**

There are numerous explanation for the focus placed on lifelong learning, in general, or on literacy, in particular. In a recent article, Preece succinctly characterises the reasons behind such a focus:

The driving forces behind the growing interest in the idea that societies should engage in continuous learning are well documented and commonly articulated as a response to global competitiveness, fast changing technologies, demographic changes, general trends for educational expansion and evolving consumer culture towards education and an espoused politics of social inclusion (Preece 2006: 308).

Lying at the heart of recent government and institutional efforts to promote adult literacy is the notion of competition. As management guru Peter Drucker accurately predicted in the late 1950s:

The knowledge society will inevitably become far more competitive than any society we have yet known—for the simple reason that with knowledge being universally accessible, there are no excuses for non-performance...it is a society in which many more people than ever before can be successful. But it is therefore, by definition, also a society in which many more people can fail... (Beatty and Drucker 1998: 170).

Individuals are not only engaged in a competition to ensure their own success but also that of their country. It is generally believed that for nations to compete
globally, they must depend on the expertise, creative processes and ‘key competencies’ of individuals within their national boundaries in order to drive the economy (Brown et al. 2001). Accordingly, policymakers are starting to emphasise and even demand higher levels of literacy to ensure the competitiveness of the nation-state; nation-states cannot afford ‘non-performance’ as it is necessary for healthy GDP growth. Competition suffuses almost all aspects of interaction: we compete for educational placements, jobs and wealth on a global, not only local, scale. And, as Holger Daun has pointed out, ‘individuals who can themselves compete for their own positions in the global context, and who can legitimate the state and strengthen its competitiveness’ are those who succeed (2002: 1). Although Daun, among others, has claimed that competition is no longer really between nations but rather companies (Daun 2002: 8), I disagree. As globalisation theorist, David Held, has noted, ‘economic globalization by no means necessarily translates into a diminution of state power; rather, it is transforming the conditions under which state power is exercised’ (quoted in Perrons 2004: 253). In terms of the role of education ascribed by the state, Andy Green rightly observes that, ‘[education] is seen primarily as a means of individual and collective economic advancement’ (1997: 4).

On one level, it is hoped that increasing literacy rates can level the playing field that has become increasingly uneven due to the offshoots of a globalised knowledge economy: job precariousness (or précarité) (Bourdieu 1998, Beck and Willms 2004) and ensuing social exclusion, disenfranchisement and impoverishment of a non-insignificant number of people, even within developed countries (Beck 1999, Bauman 2000, Giddens 2000, More pain than gain 2006). On another level, there has been much doubt expressed by scholars in adult education that lifelong learning policy truly addresses these concerns (Field 2001, Martin 2003, Rubenson 2005, Griffin 2006). As Griffin recently noted, ‘Lifelong learning has not been rejected as being too radical, but has been incorporated and appropriated by governments to serve purposes other than those which some educators think it should’ (Griffin 2006: 566). Not only do numerous educators and educational researchers feel uncomfortable at the economistic ‘colonisation’ of lifelong learning, but also, there is perhaps a greater fear that literacy and learning have sometimes been promoted in lieu of holistic social policy, thus enabling governments to evade stronger welfare commitments (Rubenson and Schuetze 2000, Veeman et al. 2006). In other words, citizens are urged to take care of themselves by learning, as the state can no longer afford to do so. Mundy and Murphy deftly capture this trend when they write:

A new policy agenda [has] emerged across social policy fields. In the field of education this has translated into new policies and policy debates that emphasise the redemptive capacity of educational investments in the context of global economic competition, while suggesting a more limited, regulatory role for the state in educational provision (2001: 227).

While part of a broader discursive focus on lifelong learning, adult literacy policy has not necessarily been backed up with adequate resources or is, as Halsey cautioned in 1970, treated ‘as the wastepaper basket of social policy—a repository for dealing with social problems where solutions are uncertain or where there is a disinclination to deal with them seriously’ (quoted in Jarvis 2002: 2).
Research questions and methodology

Given the extensive existing literature documenting both the amplified focus on literacy and learning and the contradictory role educational policy enacts in a globally competitive marketplace, it is not particularly surprising that literacy is being promoted in a variety of different contexts. This research was primarily concerned with the case of British Columbia, given its 2010 mission to become the ‘most’ literate place in North America. There were four questions motivating my research:

i. How and on what grounds is the current campaign promoted?
ii. How is the campaign perceived by those in the field?
iii. What might recent changes in policy mean for the function and provision of adult literacy programmes in British Columbia?
iv. How can we understand what is occurring in British Columbia in terms of the relationship adult learning has with the knowledge economy and global competitiveness?

The research presented here is part of a larger study aimed at understanding what governs the formation of public adult learning strategies, and how well Canadian public policy responds to the social and individual needs for adult learning. For this study, I consulted key policy documents and reports which paint an incomplete yet recognisable picture of the BC government strategy and what is happening and has happened to adult literacy provision in the province. The main report examined was Literacy and Lifelong Learning in BC: A legacy of leadership, written by the Premier’s Advisory Panel on Literacy in February 2005 to outline the government’s vision of how to make ‘BC the best educated and most literate jurisdiction on the continent’ (2005: 1). Other documents consulted included Literacy Now: A planning guide (2005), which describes and outlines the goals of the Literacy Now’s 2010 vision. To place these two documents in context, I also refer to reports which provide a more holistic view of what has happened to adult literacy rates and participation, as well as labour market trends. These documents include the Centre for Canadian Policy Alternatives’ report A Path out of Poverty (Butterwick and White 2006), which talks about changes in government policy that have affected participation of certain groups of adults in college literacy programmes. I also refer, on occasion, to the IALS and ALLS survey (OECD and Statistics Canada 1995, 2005), which shed some light on what has happened to literacy rates in Canada, in general, and in British Columbia, specifically. In addition, a Service Canada (2006) statistical report on labour market participation and change in British Columbia over the past year was reviewed. Relevant information from the reports is provided, with some analyses of discourse and information.

Following in the line of those well-known in the field of educational policy research (e.g. Apple 1986, Ball 1999, Gale 2001), I argue that reading policy requires what Freire has described as, ‘reading the word and the world’ (Freire and Macedo 1987). I draw on the work of Ball and others (Ball 1990, 1999, Taylor et al. 1997, Ozga 2000) in the area of policy sociology in my examination of texts and discourse. Differing from a traditional liberal approach to policy analysis, which assumes policy to be merely the intentions of policymakers, a critical policy sociology (Ball 1999, Gale 2001) requires engagement with and understanding of the
political, cultural, economic and historical contexts in which the policy or reports were written. This entails unpacking the politics of policies as they relate to the social context, in terms of the interests, discontinuities, omissions, compromises, and exceptions (Ball 1990: 3); and, as Whitty (2002) notes, admitting the values and goals in the politics as well as economics. As Apple (1986) has contended, texts are important ideological constructions which are part of a particular hegemonic project.

As well as consulting documents, 12 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with experts in policy and practice of adult literacy and learning in BC (in rural and urban areas) to gain insight into what the changes have been in adult literacy and what they think of the government strategy. Although this group is small it comprises: current and former policymakers, government officials in education, literacy regional coordinators, project managers and researchers in literacy, college presidents, chairpersons of government literacy initiatives, outreach workers and senior literacy educators. The identity of participants has been kept private and pseudonyms have been used to preserve anonymity. This research feeds into a wider study that examines the link between policy in British Columbia on adult literacy and inclusion, where additional texts are being reviewed and more people interviewed.

Findings: BC’s vision of creating a literacy powerhouse

This section attempts to elucidate what has been happening in British Columbia in an effort to address questions 1–3, as outlined above, whereas the discussion focuses on question 4. Characteristic of all qualitative work, however, definitive answers to these questions are not given. Rather, stories and ideas weave together to create a loosely woven picture; a story that is missing details yet whose overall message is clearly recognisable. As with any small-scale study, it hints at what might be occurring and invites further, more focused, studies to be conducted in future.

A focus on literacy

That the provincial government has taken an interest in literacy is well known, especially to those working within the literacy field. In response to whether there had been a change in the government’s treatment and perception of literacy, one participant stated: ‘I think they’re shining a beam on it [literacy]…yes, they’re focusing like a laser beam’. As Vicky, another respondent, explained:

Since it became the number one goal, it definitely has attracted lots of attention…Even when I was working with the other ministry [late 1990s], literacy seemed to be a question that was never asked. And then when Premier Campbell announced ‘it’s the number one goal’… everyone started to pay attention.

Those people I spoke with almost universally attributed Gordon Campbell as having basically single-handedly brought the goal of literacy to the fore. Literacy, as one person put it, is ‘Gordon Campbell’s thing’. ‘A personal passion’ was cited as the main reason as to why literacy had made it as one of the 2010’s five pillars. As Roxanne mused: ‘Premier Campbell has always been interested in education in a
curious kind of way’. Angela explained that, as Mayor of Vancouver, Campbell helped set up workplace literacy programmes and ‘was genuinely moved by the stories of those who are unable to read and write’, while Andrew believed that over time Campbell learned to understand ‘the impact that being illiterate has on your ability to...participate and contribute to society or your family...’ Or, as another person reflected, ‘Gordon Campbell is a smart man; he knows the benefits to having a well-educated population and workforce’.

Other people, while conceding Campbell’s personal interest, believed there were political liaisons involved. A family literacy worker thought that the Premier’s interest in literacy had to do with his ‘friendships in high places’—for example, with the head of former editor of Vancouver newspaper, the Vancouver Sun, who spearheaded the ‘raise-a-reader campaign’, or with the Canucks hockey team, who helped sponsor a family literacy centre at a community centre in Vancouver. Another four participants believed it was due to Gordon Campbell’s close relationship with the head of Literacy BC (the organisation that co-ordinates many of the literacy programmes in the province) who had probably repeatedly informed him of the importance of literacy. Another interviewee thought that Campbell had perhaps been influenced by the latest research in Human Early Learning which has established a strong link between parents reading to children and early childhood brain development. According to this respondent, bringing literacy to adults, therefore, was deemed important only in that it helped the younger generation, not the adults themselves. Whether or not any of these speculations is true, it was well-understood that literacy was rhetorically, at least, on the top of the government agenda.

*Literacy as the super-tonic to cure all ills*

Literacy educators believed that although the government cares about ‘jobs, jobs, jobs’, as one person put it, literacy is not solely promoted on the grounds that it ‘boosts the economy’. According to Rachel, Gordon Campbell ‘basically has a naïve fantasy that if everyone in BC was literate, the world would be a beautiful place’. Moving away from a solely human capital assertion that literate individuals cost less and can make more money, higher literacy skills are equated with being able to participate more fully in all aspects of social life. Literacy Now, the main government initiative associated with the government’s ‘embrace learning’ Legacies 2010 initiative, advocates literacy on the basis that it leads to greater civic skills, as well as participation in the arts, sports, recreation and volunteerism (Literacy Now 2005) which are, interestingly, the four other pillars of the original Legacies 2010 vision. In some ways, then, we can understand the success of the Legacies Now campaign, in all its incarnations, as being predicated on increasing literacy rates in the province.

In a similar manner, *A Legacy of Leadership* also alludes to Campbell’s high hopes for literacy to address social ills in the province, claiming not only that it will encourage involvement in arts, culture and recreation, but also that increasing low literacy rates will reduce crime; as page 1 of the document states: ‘It’s an issue of criminal justice’ (Premier’s Advisory Panel 2005: 2). Literacy is also promoted as a tool to improving one’s ‘health and quality of life...’ (2), providing returns in terms of social inclusion, citizen engagement and social equity (10), as well as imbuing citizens with ‘stronger cultural identities’ and civic skills (App. E 4). Not that the economy is given short-shrift, however. We are assured that higher literacy levels in the
province will have the added benefit of ‘increased productivity, innovation and adaptability in businesses and other organizations…’ (App. E 3). Further, as is stated on page 15, literacy matters because it brings:

….safer communities, reduced crime, safer workplaces, safer families, reduced risk behaviours and costs associated with it, social cohesion, employability, reduced poverty and reliance on social assistance; increased productivity, innovation and adaptability; increased quality of life.

Literacy is conceived as social policy; we are urged to ‘think of literacy as socio-economic rather than philanthropic’ (App. F 20). It is not a narrow economistic rationalisation of why literacy is important; it is, rather, a vision of literacy as helping to solve the major problems that afflict modern societies such as British Columbia in the twenty-first century.

Although those who work in adult literacy generally concur with the view that having a highly literate population is of benefit to individuals and society, some are cynical about treating literacy as the ‘be-all-and-end-all’ fix for all problems. Rachel typifies this sentiment and eloquently describes the issues she has with the current government approach:

Literacy is seen as a goal in and of itself that will fix the world’s problems. So what if someone moves from L1 to L2 [literacy levels]? It masks what is going on. Have they actually gotten a better job? Are they a happier person?... It masks other issues; [it is basic] naivety that literacy will solve social inequality as it ignores other sources of marginalisation and disenfranchisement—which aren’t necessarily ‘solved’ with moving up a level in literacy. It masks other forms of social inequality. We need to understand who is marginalised and why. We need a broad policy initiative which isn’t based on crisis...

She concludes, ‘[policymakers] focus on literacy so they don’t need to justify spending the money for other social services—relatively speaking, literacy is cheap’.

Communities know best: partnerships, collaboration and competition

I asked my participants what some of the fundamental changes had been in the administration of adult literacy over the years. In response, almost all cited the relatively recent attention paid by the government to the role of communities and community partnerships in funding and administrating adult literacy programmes. One person noted that the language had changed: ‘There’s been a definite shift in discourse—to communities, now’. Natasha explained: ‘People [are] really looking at it more... and really understanding that whole integrated... approach...that whole community development approach is the most effective one.... Over the last 10 years, I think there’s been a shift’. Participants welcomed the move to include more partners and letting communities decide ‘what’s best’. As Rachel told me: ‘Is this good? Yes. They’ve finally started to listen—that community can best define literacy needs’. Vicky considered it very smart to pool resources from different organisations and people to facilitate literacy learning, which was, as she pointed out, the specific mission of Literacy Now: ‘Their very goal is...communities ’cos they believe
that communities know best what’s good for them’. Literacy Now, which provides a
guide and financial support to community groups for community-initiated literacy
projects, stresses the importance of participation and collaboration—both consid-
ered basic tenets and principles in adult literacy practice. Their recipe for successful
programmes includes ingredients such as: innovation, respect, capacity building,
universal access, strength building, sustainability and joy (Literacy Now 2005). In
terms of inclusion, Literacy Now believes ‘task group members should be willing to
listen, open to diversity, without a personal agenda and willingness to commit to the
team’ (2005: 26).

Notwithstanding its inherent commitment to inclusion and participation, Liter-
acy Now does, in some ways, signal a turn away from institutionalised programmes
to provision through community groups. As A Legacy of Leadership informs the
reader, it is ‘not incumbent on government to devise and implement literacy devel-
opment necessarily—but to foster, facilitate and support collaboration’ (Premier’s
Advisory Panel 2005: 4). In this way, we can see the state as more of an enabler than
a provider.

While participants welcomed the inclusion of community, they recognised the
tensions. Rachel said she saw both community learning and ‘Learning Communities’,
which were being fomented by the government, as ‘community building without a
political edge…’, representing a variety of interests including ‘the neoliberal piece,
[as well as] ideas like sustainability, pedagogy and community development’. Those
with current or previous experience working in community colleges—which were the
places initially entrusted with providing literacy programmes—were hesitant in
embracing the ‘community focus’ of Literacy Now, and drew my attention to the
conflicts they perceived between community colleges and grass-roots-type literacy
programmes. Roxanne informed me that, at meetings of literacy providers, some
people working in community groups ‘might be espousing the fact that the colleges
are just not the right choice for literacy development, literacy programming—[that]
it really has to happen at the community level’. Phillip, who had experience in both
government and institutions, feared that governments were ‘dump[ing] million
dollars of funds in so-called community funding when there’s no infrastructure’. In
a similar vein, Andrew was quite hostile to Literacy Now and believed it was actually
harmful to the college sector:

All of that [Literacy Now] is being run out of the Ministry of Education, and to
all intents and purposes, it had zero impact on the post-secondary system.
‘Let’s get away from paying people living wages to do this and let’s ignore the
fact that there’s a body of knowledge and use a community of volunteers’.
What I see there is a deliberate attempt to deprofessionalise… the college
system has not been consulted on any issues of literacy at all.

In fact, although ‘partnerships’ and ‘collaboration’ may be the words on policy-
makers’ lips, competition is still a reality. There were palpable tensions between
those working in colleges—funded by the Ministry of Advanced Education—and
those working in community organisations that, more often than not, were funded
by the Ministry of Education (mainly responsible for the K-12 sector). Andrew, for
example, opined: ‘So the Ministry of Advanced Ed and the Ministry of Education
still dance around who’s got the lead and the Ministry of Ed keeps on getting in the
way, in my view’. Similarly, both Angela and Roxanne believe that schools had
discovered that ‘there’s money in adult literacy’. Inequitable salaries help fuel the rivalry, Jo-Anne explained:

There’s also the whole thing like college programmes. College instructors are well paid and that’s great, you know? They’re unionised workers and a lot of people get salaries whereas the community people make a lot less money. They make like a grad student, kind of thing 22, 25 dollars an hour.

Participants also identified there being more competition in general. Rachel explained that there had been a move from core funding to project-based funding which had resulted in greater competition: ‘More competition for grants—even within your own organisation! And across the province—every group across the province is competing for funding...we’re all competing against each other’. The shift from core to project-based funding has arguably resulted in more instability for institutions and organisations and more short-term projects. With fewer grants, stricter criteria and tighter deadlines for grants, there was fear that there would be even further competition and heightened insecurity. Jo-Anne, for example, was already lamenting: ‘I know people who’ve had to close programmes. That they’re no longer sexy to the partners’. Partnerships, celebrated by government, were sometimes mistrusted by organisations and individuals in literacy work.

*Communication systems all shut down?*

The channels of communication between organisations, ministries and even individuals were not entirely open, and, in spite of efforts concentrated on ‘increasing consultative processes’, such consultation did not always take place. For example, although Roxanne endorsed the community-based processes and goals of Literacy Now, she did not feel they (at Literacy Now) ‘practised what they preached’:

And the Literacy Now programme, you know, there was some issues at the beginning because when they went in, it’s just…it’s so ironic...it blows me away...and many of us in the field has a really good surly laugh at this. Here it is a really big community development exercise—Literacy Now—and they ploughed in like a rhino. They didn’t exhibit any proper community development practices in doing it.

Andrew, among others but perhaps more strongly, believed that there were serious problems in terms of the relationship between organisations and government. He cynically derided the Ministry of Advanced Education’s approach to consultation: ‘You have the consultation and it becomes apparent after a while that the decisions have already actually been made, and you’re just going through this as a dance to say, yeah, there’s consultation’. In addition, Samantha described to me her frustration at trying to bring issues to the policy table: ‘You see...basically a community organisation, the same kind of frustration and anger at being marginalised as the people they’re servicing, right? Like if you move up the line, it’s a cycle of abuse, right?’ Like others—both within and outside of policy—she believed that there was much confusion about what the policies were. In addition, Vicky thought that there was a large disconnect between government and those ‘on-the-ground’, as both...
groups were ‘still talking of different things’. This would concur with Griffin’s comment that ‘lifelong educators and policymakers constitute distinct communities of practice’ (2006: 561).

_Raising the literacy rates of which British Colombians?_

According to the 2003 Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey, 40 per cent of British Colombians have literacy rates below level 3, which is considered the minimal level at which to be able to function in society (Statistics Canada 2005). In other words, only 60 per cent of the province’s population could be considered ‘functionally literate’, and those at level 3—38 per cent of the province—have literacy skills at levels which mean their ability to parse and engage with complex prose is doubtful. Although literacy rates have improved in the province from 1994 levels (when IALS was conducted)—down from 42 per cent at levels 1 and 2, for example—the increase has been negligible (OECD and Statistics Canada 2005). What has been noted, however, is that British Columbia has some of the most highly literate individuals in Canada, with the highest percentages at levels 4 and 5. This fact accounts for why British Columbia currently has the highest average literacy rates in the country, after sparsely-populated Yukon, a fact that would surely please Premier Campbell.

There are seemingly, however, literacy ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. The current losers, who overwhelmingly come from rural areas and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and who are disproportionately immigrants or of indigenous descent, have been made a priority in the government’s campaign to raise literacy rates in the province. The _Legacy of Leadership_ report claims that programmes should target ‘at-risk’ groups—such as ‘seniors, aboriginals, immigrants, persons with disabilities and the poor’ (Premier’s Advisory Panel 2005: 10), and that there should be specific intervention for those with mental illnesses and reliance on social assistance. Echoing this concern, current Deputy Minister of Advanced Education, Moura Quayle, stated in a recent talk that she gave at the University of British Columbia, that one of the 10 principles for post-secondary education was that it should ‘focus on vulnerable populations’ so to close gaps in education levels. There are many indications, however, that certain groups of people may not currently be accessing programmes. In response to whether government policies had changed, one of the policy analysts I interviewed predicted that ‘people will tell you how government policies have shifted by who’s not coming to programmes’.

In fact, instead of targeting ‘at-risk’ groups, policies enacted over the past years have actually hindered access for numbers of people. Butterwick and White (2006) have conducted a study into the changes brought about by one policy change made in 2002: halting a programme which had previously allowed Income Assistance (IA) recipients considered to have multiple barriers to receive benefits while taking courses free-of-charge at BC Colleges and institutes. Many of these courses were in adult basic education and literacy. Both Rachel and Philip saw the paradox in how stringent clampdowns on welfare recipients were emanating from the ‘same government that is now crying the joys of literacy’ (Rachel). This policy change had accordingly ‘devastating’ (Roxanne) results for the colleges. According to Butterwick and White’s correspondents, there has been a ‘drastic decline in the number of low-income students’ (2006: 24), and a drop in First Nations’ learners and those with
low levels of education. Roxanne explained that there was a marked shift in who was enrolling in literacy and adult basic education (ABE) programmes:

You see that now, when there’s this big line up of everyone lining up to register for ABE. You just see a lot of the pretty savvy looking people with backpacks, and cellphones and designer jeans, wow…. A lot of young people living with their parents.

Since 2002, a number of those working in the field of adult literacy have become frustrated with, what they see as, conflicting messages coming down from government. In particular, they identify the policies governing welfare and income assistance as stymieing the learning opportunities of British Columbia’s most vulnerable. Samantha gave some indication of how that played out with the students she dealt with as an outreach workers for an adult learning programme in Vancouver:

We’re constantly at odds with MEIA [Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance]6 because of the way policy comes down through that ministry… the official…policy is… I mean it changes no matter what. So, people are told ‘You may go to school…you may return to school but it has to be in the evening. It has to be outside of daytime hours when you should be looking for work’. So you come out and say ‘I’m on welfare, I want to go to school, I need to retrain. I wanna get my high school diploma ‘cos I want a better education so I can get a better job. So I can be more employable’. Rather than just doing these low-level jobs, right? So workers [MEIA workers] can say ‘No. you can’t go to school at all’. We’ve had that. We’ve had workers who’ve been like ‘No. You can’t go to school’.

As White and Butterwick conclude in their study: ‘The current policy focus on the quickest route to a job does not offer IA recipients an adequate pathway out of poverty’ (2006: 15).

Other barriers facing welfare applicants had also increased, which was having a direct effect on adult learning centres. For instance, according to a couple of my participants, MEIA had changed their procedures for how to apply for welfare benefits, making it entirely web-based. In other words, the only way a person can now apply for income assistance in British Columbia is online. Samantha continued detailing her frustration with the Ministry that governs welfare assistance in the province:

Now just imagine… what we saw—number one, the off-loading of…people who would go to the [welfare] offices and say ‘I don’t have a computer’. On assistance how could they afford $2000? So there are only two computers at the Ministry of Welfare and the people who work there can only help so many people at a time…. They were off-loading that onto community organisations, whoever had computer access…. They’ve been told, ‘go there and get help…you’ve got an educator who’s there to help people with learning and literacy issues’. So they’re, ‘Can you help me with that? I don’t know how to use a computer’. Or ‘I can’t read, I have dyslexia or I have undiagnosed learning disabilities’, right?
Samantha, thus, questioned the professed drop in unemployment rates in the province: ‘Congratulations on cutting the welfare rolls but you’re not getting people jobs, you’ve got people dropping below the radar because they can’t access the form’. As she observed, ‘It’s disenfranchising people who are already totally marginalised, who already have mental health issues, abuse issues or whatever, literacy, poverty all these things’. As can be concluded from Samantha’s assessment, these individuals ‘off the radar’ are not just losing the game of global competitiveness. They are not even participating.

**Hope for the 2010 vision?**

There was—perhaps predictably—much apprehension, as well as cynicism, around whether the government’s 2010 goal would make a substantial impact on literacy levels and life opportunities for the province’s most marginalised. There was no consensus as to whether there would be, or had been, substantially increased funding to literacy outside of the CD$7 million dollars allotted to Literacy Now (the initial CD$5 plus additional money allotted over the following two years). Andrew was concerned that the money (which had been given to the Ministry of Education) would end up ‘for the kids’, while Vicky also doubted that the focus was truly on the literacy needs of adults but rather children. When I asked people to recount the changes that had occurred since Legacies Now had been launched, Roxanne said that a ‘whole bunch of programmes’ had been added while Rachel answered that maybe there was more money but her organisation ‘hadn’t seen much of it’.

According to many, it ‘remained to be seen’ what would happen. When I asked one participant what kind of impact she thought the campaign would have, she responded:

> What impact will it have? Well I guess my hope would be that there will be more opportunities. But the fear would be that hey by 2010 that’s it then—we’re literate now so we can stop. Or they’ll say—well we’re not literate but shhh—don’t tell anybody, we’ll stop. You know? I mean, I dunno.

In a similar tone, Roxanne feared that the crusade to boost literacy levels might become a short-term PR stunt where no-one is really thinking past 2010: ‘[I fear that it’s like] hurry up and get to the ball and once the party’s over everyone sort of just packs up and goes’. And, as another person reflected:

> [Literacy] looks good on paper. It looks good for publicity. It looks great. To say: ‘This is what our focus is, and this is how much money we’re giving to it, five million dollars’. And that’s what the public hears—‘Great, five million bucks, going on literacy. I’m glad’. But who knows where that goes? Where does that money?… Where is the funding actually going?

The most mocking of the 2010 goal was Andrew: ‘Perhaps there’s a way to do it…to give everybody a bus ticket to leave the province’.

There was, nonetheless, cautious optimism among policymakers and practitioners. All concurred that there had been a lowering of stigma and a greater public awareness brought about through the campaign. There had also been a recent
collaborative development between the Ministry of Advanced Education and literacy organisations who were working to build an evaluation tool called *From the Ground Up*, a project which allowed people working in literacy, rather than policymakers, to set the agenda for ‘what counts as learning’. Through this ongoing project, educators were able to start showing that successful education and literacy programmes ‘have to link to everyday needs and lives’ (Amanda). Natasha noted: ‘Everyone wants to be accountable. It’s really more how do you do achieve it in meaningful ways.’ This project was allowing literacy workers to educate the Ministry on the ways in which literacy learning and education in general can make fundamental changes in people’s lives:

> Just the fact they’re showing up to the programme three times a week at 10 o’clock in the morning is a significant achievement, ‘cos of the things that person has to organise in their lives. They can’t do drugs all night long anymore, ‘cos they gotta be up at 10 o’clock. (Roxanne).

Over half the participants said they were happy about the government campaign—although they were unsure what the ultimate outcome would be. Many cited similar concerns to Angela, upon reflecting on the 2010 goal: ‘I don’t know if he’s [Gordon Campbell] thought deeply on how to do this’. Nonetheless, there was cautious optimism in the air. Phillip, who had been in the field for over 30 years, told me: ‘There’s a lot to be positive...optimistic about but I’ve been around long enough to know you just have to be realistic’, while Amanda, who had worked in the field in both policy and education for over two decades, stated: ‘It’s the best time to be working in literacy’.

**Discussion**

*Literacy—an international game with winners and losers*

However passionate British Columbia’s Premier may be about literacy, he is not the only one with a mission to be surrounded by the most literate citizens. In terms of achieving his goal to create one of the most literate places on the planet, there are many keen contenders who vie for that title. A quick internet search on ‘the most literate’ is revealing: ‘The Japanese, the most literate in the world’ (Laughing Knees 2004); ‘[Iceland’s] society is the most literate in the world’ (Converse College 2006); ‘Sri Lanka—one of the most literate in the world’ (Sri Lanka High Commission 2006); ‘The Finnish—considered the most literate in the world’ (’Is Finland worth saving?’ 2006). And even particular demographics are singled out as being the world’s most literate: ‘Australia’s 15 year-olds’ (Live in Australia 2006); or New Zealand school children, who, according to PISA tests (apparently), ‘are the most literate in the world in English’ (Easton 2006).

There is almost a global obsession about ‘being the best’ in literacy. This is in some ways not surprising: after all, competition has, almost undisputedly, increased under the growing globalisation and internationalisation of the economy. Furthermore, as has been documented in many arenas, globalisation has altered the role of the state—with economic competitiveness, the game in which all nations must now compete, becoming a matter of civic responsibility. Tivey succinctly captured this
phenomenon as far back as in 1981: ‘For the nationalist, economic development is a matter of pride and patriotic duty!’ (Tivey 1981: 68). National jubilation and pride are contingent on how many gold medals are won in terms of GDP. Over 25 years later, economic development through education is being promoted as a patriotic duty. Under a knowledge economy, literacy is considered a reflection of a healthy citizenry who can contribute to the financial well-being of the nation-state. What is interesting, in the case of British Columbia, is that it is provincialism—rather than nationalism—that is driving the race to be the best. This also appears to be going on across Canada. What my respondent Roxanne told me was revealing:

I was at the Alberta provincial literacy conference and the Minister of Advanced Education did the keynote address...and he talked about Alberta being the most literate jurisdiction in Canada. I was telling people about this and the Ontario people were saying ‘No, no, no. Just a minute’. And they used similar language. So there was definitely something going on.

Similarly, a New Brunswick Cabinet Minister has made it his mission for New Brunswickans ‘[to] become the most educated in the world’ (Learn NB 2006).

Canada is not the only country where an internal battle for the nation’s most literate or educated is taking place. In 2004, current president of Central Connecticut State University, John Miller, set out on a mission to determine which America’s most literate cities were. British Columbians should take comfort, perhaps, from the fact that for 2005 and 2006 Seattle came out on top (Marklein 2005, Miller 2006)—as it is the closest major city in the United States both geographically and arguably also culturally. However, what is meant by ‘literate’ is telling, since the only factors considered or variables measured were: newspaper circulation, number of bookstores, library resources, periodical publishing resources, educational attainment and, added in his study of 2005, internet resources (Marklein 2005). Who is accessing these resources is a question that goes unanswered, and whether any of this resource-counting is indicative or reflective of literacy rates is highly dubious. What is clear is that cities, as well as states or provinces, care and seem to have taken the results seriously, boasting them on websites (see, eg Swift 2004).

There is something inherently problematic, however, with taking a competitive approach to literacy and learning—whether this takes place at the municipal, provincial or nation-state level. In putting forward an alternative to these models, Preece (2006) argues for the idea of a ‘learning world’ rather than distinct learning societies. In her research which looked at the cases of Scotland, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, England, Finland, Singapore, NZ, Australia, Hong Kong, Preece concludes: ‘Unless countries choose to dialogue with each other, in the spirit of a learning world, they will continue to measure each other on a league table of economic competitiveness’ (2006: 318) (original emphasis). Instead of promoting an increase in learning, then, what we are left with is tantamount to a ‘competitive league table’ (318).

*Literacy for whom?*

It is also up for debate whether those deemed as having ‘insufficient’ literacy skills to cope with and adapt to the knowledge economy actually have good reasons to
improve their literacy levels, given that many people have little chance of even participating in the knowledge economy. As Robert Reich (1992) claims in *The Work of Nations* (borrowing in his title, of course, from Adam Smith’s seminal primer of classical economics) only 20 per cent of workers in the ‘new economy’ will be what Peter Drucker has termed ‘knowledge workers’ and what he called ‘symbolic analysts’. In other words, according to Reich, a good 80 per cent of the global population would not need particularly well developed critical thinking skills or high levels of literacy. Reich’s rather arrogant and nationalistic response to this was to let most of the non-thinking jobs ‘drift overseas’, and have the symbolic analytical occupations concentrate in the US. This dream, of course, has not come to fruition given the millions of Americans who work in menial service industry jobs for minimum (and sub-minimum) wages.

British Columbia, like the UK and also the US is taking the low-skills/high-skills route outlined by Brown *et al.* (2001), where there are a small pool of jobs that require Reich’s ‘symbolic analytical skills’ and a large pool of low-skill jobs in the service or resource extraction sector. Indeed, if we look at the most recent statistics on changes in labour market participation in the province over the past year, we see that the greatest increases have been in information, culture and recreation (+23 per cent) and forestry, mining, fishing, oil and gas (+11.2 per cent), while construction has also increased (Service Canada 2006). This is largely attributed to the boom in trade with China (in terms of the growing demand for resources), the growth of the film industry, and activities related to the 2010 Winter Olympics. Furthermore, although the rate of employment is up on the previous year, there was a 7 per cent increase in part-time positions and only a 3 per cent increase in full-time jobs (Service Canada 2006). While it appears fairly obvious that with literacy levels of 1 and 2, workers may have difficulty performing their job at an adequate level, there is no evidence that most the jobs added over the past year actually require above-average literacy rates (i.e. at levels 4 or 5).

Much of the competition seems set to be played out more between individuals than between either provinces or nations. As both Ulrich Beck (2000) and Zygmunt Bauman (2001) have astutely noted, competition has been ideologically reified at the individual level, leading to heightened anxiety in the individual of the need to be both unique as well as better than others. It is no longer a question of being ‘good enough’ but being better, in such a way as to justify our existence in the World Risk Society (Beck 1999). In other words, individuals are competing against other individuals for both educational opportunities and chances at securing employment in the jobs that actually require high literacy levels. Literacy has become a game in which there are winners and losers.

*Beyond the game?*

In 2006 Starbucks, the international coffee conglomerate, co-produced a film with Vancouver production company, Lionsgate Films, called *Akeelah the Bee* which tells the story of an ultimate literacy learner: an African-American girl, Akeelah, who comes from a low socioeconomic community in Los Angeles, whose brother is in a gang and whose parents are either dead (father) or largely emotionally absent (mother), ‘spells’ her way to the top, winning the national spelling bee. Literacy, in the same way as it is being promoted in British Columbia under the Legacies 2010
vision, is Akeelah’s salvation. This film, as well as the concept of the spelling bee provides a useful metaphor for understanding British Columbia’s 2010 goal. Literacy is conceived as a way to overcome hardship, as well as a competition: there can be only one winner in the ‘sports game’ of spelling (see The National Spelling Bee 2006). Just as Starbucks claims to have ‘the world’s best coffee’ (Starbucks Canada 2007), Akeelah can now claim to be the nation’s best speller.

The findings from this study thus far paint a complex picture, however. Punitive policies within the Ministry that oversees employment and income assistance have been identified by everyone I spoke with—even those who work within the Ministries of Education—as further dividing the literacy winners from losers. In addition, there is clear indication of the withdrawal of the state—in this case, the ‘provincial’ state—in the oversight of adult literacy provision. On the one hand, this can be viewed cynically as an attempt to devolve responsibility to community; like Bonal observes, ‘the state reconstructs meaning concepts like community or civil society in a way that they can actually appeal more to citizens’ duties than to citizens’ rights’ (Bonal 2003: 167). In this manner, learning is construed as a duty one has to the state (or province) rather than a right to be afforded to all. Concentrating on community, rather than public institutions, has also been done primarily for the fact it saves money. As Drucker, who arguably revolutionised the NGO sector as well as management in general, has noted: ‘The non-profit organization gets at least twice the bang out of each buck as government’ (Beatty and Drucker 1998: 175). On the other hand, there are democratising opportunities inherent in transferring a greater share of the power over to community. Initiatives such as From the Ground Up, the community-run evaluation programme, require that literacy educators, instead of government officials, ‘do the work’ in devising a tool that can provide some insight into the learning that takes place through literacy education. While these literacy workers might be relatively poorly-paid for their efforts, they retain most control over the process—although the instrument they ultimately devise must be approved by the Ministry of Advanced Education.

On another point, although it is debated whether literacy or education are actually used or needed for the jobs in which literacy learners find themselves (Livingstone 1999), being able to read and write has the potential to further citizen engagement and ultimately transform the world. To extend a somewhat overused Freirean adage: through the word, we read the world in order to write it. Engaging textually with the world is probably more important than ever to the democratisation of our world. As the astronomical increase in personal blogs, wikipedia entries, emails, message-boards, and online activist groups attest, there is real power in the pen, or, in this case, keyboard. While a counter-revolution and over-throw of global capitalism through the internet is maybe a little overstated (Strangelove 2005), engaging on-line with a global community provides us with a real ability to shape our global environment. It can be, thus, a way in which we are able to engage in the Freirean notion of praxis: reflecting and acting upon the world in order to transform it (Freire 1997).

Although adult literacy education cannot be thought of a panacea to social problems and must be conceived as part of a broad social policy, the recent emphasis placed on literacy and lifelong learning in British Columbia offers opportunities to organisations, educators and learners. Unlike the Olympic Games where there can be only one gold medallist, current literacy policy in British Columbia may benefit different people to differing degrees and in unpredictable ways. While those working
in the policy and practice of adult literacy are not ready to award Campbell with a medal for his uneven efforts, they do admit that the limelight currently given to literacy is long overdue. In this manner, Jo-Anne represents the sentiment of the vast majority of those people interviewed:

What has changed? Ahh well, I suppose we have to say that the government has taken more interest…. Ahh definitely…. As much as I hate Gordon Campbell…I don’t mind going on record as hating Gordon Campbell [laughs]. He has taken an interest. He has kind of put it on the agenda.

Notes

1. For those unfamiliar with the Canadian system, it is important to understand that education—including adult education—is largely funded and administered at the provincial, not national, level. There are two ministries which oversee education in the province of British Columbia: the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Advanced Education.

2. I realise that the two terms ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge economy’ connote very different ideas—where, in the former term, the economy is not given linguistic preference. However, in practice, both these terms are often used interchangeably and most frequently refer to the economy.

3. An ‘outreach worker’ works in a literacy organisation and performs a similar job of both a liaison officer and social worker.

4. The talk given by Deputy Minister Quayle was entitled ‘Principles to position BC’s community of learners’ and was given at Green College, University of British Columbia on 27 March, 2006.

5. ‘First Nations’ is the term given to the indigenous peoples of Canada.

6. Like education, benefits and assistance are also administered provincially in Canada.

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